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From Painting to Performance: Figuring the Abstract in Los Angeles Art

Harriet Curtis

L.A. RAW: Object Expressionism in Los Angeles 1945–1980, From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy, exhibition catalogue by Michael Duncan, Santa Monica, CA: Foggy Notion Books in collaboration with the Pasadena Museum of California Art, 2012, 208 pp., 161 images, \$45.00

Published on the occasion of the exhibition curated by Michael Duncan at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, L.A. RAW is an innovative and historically rich contribution to the Pacific Standard Time project, initiated by the Getty to celebrate art in Los Angeles between 1945 and 1980. Resulting in numerous exhibitions, events, festivals and performances across a broad range of cultural institutions around the city between October 2011 and March 2012, Pacific Standard Time was an unprecedented reinvestigation into Los Angeles art of the post-Second World War period. In turn, L.A. RAW presents a unique and important narrative of figurative expressionism in the region. Specifically, Duncan offers an insight into the re-emergence of figuration as a viable form in Los Angeles art of the 1980s, and traces a local history of figurative expressionists in the post-war era. Duncan also pits this localized narrative against other dominant characterizations of Los Angeles art, notably Paul Schimmel's exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s* (1992), which explored 'the darker, angst-ridden side of contemporary life', reflected in the abject figurations of contemporary artists such as Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, and Raymond Pettibon.¹ As both Schimmel and Duncan observe, the preponderance of abject, figurative art in the 1980s and early 1990s coincided with a resurgence of international interest in Los Angeles as a centre for contemporary art making. As Duncan points out, however, few have connected this exploration of the darkest recesses of society and human psychology, 'this dark, quirky art' (11), to previously dominant forms of the Los Angeles art scene, such as light and space sculptures, assemblages, and geometric abstractions. Duncan contends that abject figuration has instead been portrayed as something of an anomaly in the Los Angeles scene, and seeks to shed light on its heritage. *L.A. RAW* traces the development of figurative art in Los Angeles through the work of forty-one artists, beginning with the expressionist drawings and paintings of the 1940s and 1950s, 'which reflect the artistic climate of introspection and angst' (12) of the post-war period. As Duncan suggests, this work then set the scene for later feminist, body-based, performance and politically engaged work of the 1960s and 1970s, and accounts in part for the continued presence of figurative, expressionist work in Los Angeles from the 1980s onwards.

The catalogue consists of an introductory essay by Duncan, which sketches the themes and practices of this lineage, with reflective observations by Peter Selz, and forty-one widely researched artist biographies, noting particular pedagogical and cultural influences. The texts are accompanied by a remarkable volume of artistic ephemera, including exhibition announcements, posters, preparatory sketches and letters, and pages from Wallace Berman's famed artists' publication *Semina* (1955–64). Another insightful inclusion is Chris Burden's *Donatello* (1975), a collage of articles from *Arts* and *Oui* magazines about his performance and body art practices of the 1970s. Alongside the collated texts are annotations by the artist, noting the particular inaccuracies and mistaken presumptions that writers so often draw from his work. This illustrated volume acts not only as a unique chapter in a series of re-imaginings of post-war Los Angeles art represented in Pacific Standard Time (chief among which is perhaps the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

exhibition *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987*, the first ever retrospective of the Chicano performance and conceptual art group Asco), but as an archive in itself, reflective of the context in which they were first received.

Duncan's central thesis, that the resurgence (or in his view, the consistent presence) of figurative art in Los Angeles has its roots in a localized history visible to all those willing to see it, is reflected in the use of humanism as a central curatorial theme. Through this, Duncan is able to connect a broad group of artists, whose practices range widely across painting, drawing, sculpture, photography and photographic manipulation, performance, video, assemblage, and printmaking.

In the group exhibition *New Images of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1959, curator Peter Selz sought to connect expressionist figuration in mid-twentieth-century painting and sculpture to the existentialist writings of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Camus, whilst emphasizing the renewal of the peculiar and profound feelings of anxiety, solitude and despair that evolves as each generation of artists finds its figurative form.² Similarly, in *L.A. RAW*, Duncan presents a cross-section of figurative art, which has developed across several generations of artists, a scene which, particular to Los Angeles, reflects all the energetic creativity of the art schools in the region. In particular Duncan highlights the teaching of Lebrun, Howard Warshaw, and William Brice at the Jepson Art Institute (1946–52), and their passionate belief in drawing as the foundation of expressionist art (13). He credits them with influencing a generation of artists towards dramatic depictions of the human figure, the fruition of which is evidenced clearly throughout the catalogue. This also allows insight into the more casual connections made by artists living and working within the vicinity. The significance of Lebrun's influence on the Los Angeles art scene is clear, and particularly so in the biography of his counterpart, Paul McCarthy. As Duncan highlights, as an art student in Salt Lake City in the 1960s McCarthy encountered reproductions of Lebrun's work that were to leave a great impression on him (183). Another important figure in this narrative is John Altoon, whose satirical drawings and sketches clearly inform and permeate the practices of many younger artists, including Llyn Foulkes, Kim Jones and McCarthy. Duncan also highlights the work of several enigmatic figures of the Los Angeles art scene, notably the delicate, mystical drawings and paintings of occult figure Cameron (born Marjorie Cameron, 1922–95), and Edmund Teske (1911–96), whose ethereal photographic collages overlay images of the human body with natural landscapes. The theme of humanism, arranged around a profound artistic responsibility to represent the realities of human experience, enables Duncan to cut across genre and form, providing a persuasive argument for the organization of works across a thematic rather than historical narrative.

The artist biographies are arranged roughly chronologically, which allows for surprising aesthetic and historical connections to be made. Where such connections are illuminated most strikingly is in the relationship between work by performance and body artists of the 1970s and the figurative paintings and drawings of the 1940s and 1950s. As Duncan stresses, the trajectory from Lebrun to McCarthy may seem a complicated, even eccentric path towards an understanding of figuration in Los Angeles. However, the risk-taking body performances of Chris Burden and explorations of spirituality, sexuality and identity emboldened in the works of Barbara T. Smith, for example, are perfectly suited to this investigation of humanist traditions in figurative art.

McCarthy's work in particular acts as a nexus of art-historical references and extends across a broad spectrum of genres, a handful of which are represented in *L.A. RAW*. In *Face Painting – Floor, White Line* (1972/94), for example, he engages in a physical version of abstract expressionism, or action painting, by using his face and body to push white paint across the floor. Also represented are later works in which he moves on to ritualistic actions that engage visceral bodily processes and

fluids, for example in the video performance *Sailor's Meat* (1975), and preparatory sketches and drawings of the sexualized body, which reveal his visual research processes for later video performances. Indeed, as Duncan contends, McCarthy has worked tirelessly across 'nearly every imaginable medium', and in every one 'has created works that probe the human condition in its most abject state' (183). In turn, McCarthy's current and ongoing artistic practice extends Duncan's trajectory of abject expressionism in Los Angeles across a further three decades of art history, whilst also providing an intricate local history of figurative art into which this, and many other internationally renowned artists, are uniquely placed.

L.A. RAW is a successful and celebratory realization of the heritage of abject figuration of the 1980s and 1990s, and offers a compelling history of post-war expressionism unique to the Los Angeles art scene. The catalogue and exhibition allow for an exploration or opening out of the questions of the human condition, including the atrocities of war, the afflictions of fear and paranoia as they become visible through the human body, and re-appropriations of the abject body in identity politics, with which these artists are engaging, rather than necessarily being tied by the formal artistic processes that are utilized.

¹ Paul Schimmel, 'Into the maelstrom: L.A. Art at the end of the century' in Catherine Gudis, ed., *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, Los Angeles, CA, 1992, 19.

² Peter Selz, *New Images of Man*, New York, 1959, 11.